

“Full, conscious and active participation.” Some reflections on the revised English translation of the *Ordo Missae* in the proposed Missal of the Roman Catholic Church

Jeffery Rowthorn

On December 4, 1963 Pope Paul VI promulgated the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Consilium*) which the bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council had adopted by 2,147 votes to 4. This virtual unanimity on their part should be recognized as an extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church as well as to those of us who, loving the liturgy profoundly, are not Roman Catholics.

The implementation of the Constitution was to be shaped in the light of the following general norms among others:

- “that...the rites be revised carefully in the light of sound tradition and ... be given new vigor to meet the circumstances and needs of modern times” (para.4);
- “that sound tradition ...be retained, and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress” (para.23); and
- “the rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation” (para.34).

This last norm, and especially the phrase “within the people’s powers of comprehension”, immediately reminds me, as an Anglican, of what Archbishop Thomas Cranmer said in his Preface to the first Book of Common Prayer (published in English rather than Latin in 1549):

And moreover, whereas St. Paul would have such language spoken to the people in the church, as they might understand and have profit by hearing the same; the service in this Church of England (these many years) hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understood not; so that they have heard with their ears only; and their hearts, spirit, and mind have not been edified thereby.

How are these norms and what they are calling for related to the revised English translation of the *Ordo Missae*? Three prior considerations come to mind:

- the need to understand what constitutes an “accurate” translation and to be aware of the price paid when “accurate” is taken to mean as literal a translation as possible;
- the need to ensure that intelligibility, euphony and proclaimability (not a gracious word in itself, but a vital consideration) not be sacrificed in the quest for an “accurate” translation;

- the need to recognize that Latin constructions may be elegant in the original but, if translated too literally, can sound contrived and inelegant in English.

These concerns are heightened when it comes to translating Eucharistic Prayer I which as the Roman Canon remained unchanged at the heart of the Mass from the Missal of Pope Pius V (1570) to the promulgation of the present Missal (1969). Prayed *secretò* in Latin and therefore neither heard nor understood by the people, it was nonetheless held in awe and revered in much the same way as the Eucharistic Prayer in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer has been esteemed and treasured by many in my own tradition. Among Roman Catholics this is still the case in some quarters, and understandably so, yet now even the Roman Canon is prayed aloud in English.

So, with a revision of the English version of the Roman Missal underway, the question arises, as it did immediately after Vatican II when the present translation was prepared: does an accurate and faithful translation even of prayers hallowed by long use necessarily require that it be rendered literally and almost word for word? Or is careful paraphrasing necessary at some points for the sake of intelligibility, euphony and proclaimability?

In responding to those questions I am limiting myself to the *Ordo Missae* itself. The Proper of Seasons, the Proper of Saints and the various Ritual Masses would doubtless provide further illustrations of the points I wish to make. So, too, would the Prefaces and Orations (the opening prayer, the prayer over the gifts and the postcommunion prayer), but they have yet to be made available for study.

So let me share some thoughts that have come to mind as I have now read through and read aloud the *Ordo Missae* in its 1974 and proposed 2010 translations. I do so, having just spent ten weeks at St. John's Abbey, attending Mass daily in the Abbey Church and listening to the words of the present translation prayed by priest and people alike.

(In what follows the numbers in brackets refer in each case to a particular section of the study text of the revised translation of the *Ordo Missae*. The revised text is on the left, the current text on the right.)

Improvements or otherwise

Certain of the changes made in the revised translation are improvements on the present text in the Missal. Examples are the second of the Opening Acclamations (2);

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.	The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
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the second line of the *Gloria in excelsis* (8);

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.	Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
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the prayer before the sharing of the Peace (126);

Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles, Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will. Who live and reign for ever and ever.	Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give you. Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom, where you live for ever and ever.
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“Behold the Lamb of God” (132);

Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb. Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.	This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper. Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.
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and the private prayer of the celebrant during the cleansing of the communion vessels (137).

What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart, that what has been given to us in time may be our healing for eternity.	Lord, may I receive these gifts in purity of heart. May they bring me healing and strength, now and for ever.
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In a few cases the changes could be described as *adiaphora*, the new translation offering no improvement on the present version and therefore difficult to justify. Examples are the deacon's request for the priest's blessing before the reading of the Gospel (14);

May I have your blessing, Father.	Father, give me your blessing.
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the change in the Nicene Creed from "all that is seen and unseen" to "all things visible and invisible" – more literal, yes, but no gain in clarity or change in meaning (18); and the replacement of all three options for the Dismissal with four new options, only one of which actually appears in the revised Latin text (144).

Go forth, the Mass is ended. *Or*: Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord. *Or*: Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life. *Or*: Go in peace.

One must ask: Why make these changes?

Intelligibility

If the rites of the Church are to have "a noble simplicity" and "be within the people's powers of comprehension" (CSL, 34), then the use of words unfamiliar to contemporary worshippers or open to being misunderstood by them should be avoided, even if they are a literal translation of the Latin. In this respect compare these examples from the two versions, the present text being quoted first: "one in Being with Father" – "consubstantial with the Father" (18); "with all the bishops" – "with the Order of Bishops" (113); "I shall be healed" – "my soul shall be healed" when what is being asked for is healing for the entirety of "my person" and not just some part of "me" (132). Even the word "venerable (hands)" immediately suggests "old" rather than "worthy of veneration" (89/90).

One of the beauties of Latin is its ability to express in elegantly compact language what English cannot so compactly replicate. So the concluding words of the *Nobis quoque* in the Roman canon (96) read: "...intra quorum nos consortium, non aestimator meriti, sed veniae, quaesumus, largitor admitte." The proposed revision offers this translation: "...admit us, we beg you, into their company, not weighing our merits, but granting us your pardon." The present text reworks the entire paragraph, ending with the words: "...Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness."

One other example deserves mention. When Eucharistic Prayer II is used in a Mass for the Dead (105), the fourteen words beginning “Concede, ut...” require twenty-three words in the revised English translation: “...Grant that he (she) who was united with your Son in a death like his, may also be one with him in his Resurrection.” The present text, on the other hand, requires only twelve words: “...In baptism he (she) died with Christ: may he (she) also share his resurrection.”

In the light of the call for intelligibility what weight is to be given in these two instances to the virtues of a largely literal translation or of a careful paraphrasing of the original text? In a sense that question is a window into the broader issues mentioned earlier.

Euphony

If a prayer, heard often in worship, comes to be increasingly appreciated and ultimately treasured, then its poetic grace and literary quality account in considerable measure for that. In the revised version of the *Ordo Missae* I found quite a number of instances where the word order or the baldness or the ponderous quality of the translation diminishes the beauty, strength and flow of what is said. Why not preserve the familiar progression, “My fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault” (4)? Instead it is this: “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

The new text is: “The mystery of faith.” Why not say, “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith” (91 etc.) to avoid the starkness of the Latin, “Mysterium fidei”? Why not translate “Dignum et justum est” (31 etc.) with the words, “It is right and just so to do”, sparing the ear the baldness of the proposed response of the people, “It is right and just.”?

On the other hand, the exact parallelism of the Offertory Prayers (23/25) is pleasing to the ear (apart from the word “for” in the second line which could be dispensed with).

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.	Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you: fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink.
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That is not true of the line at the end of Eucharistic Prayer II (105) which it is proposed to translate: “we may merit to be co-heirs to eternal life” (presently it reads: “make us worthy to share eternal life” which is more pleasing to the ear).

Proclaimability

In many cases what is not written in good literary style is not easy to proclaim clearly and compellingly. Much, therefore, of what has already been said about intelligibility and euphony bears on the reading aloud of the prayers of the Mass. Take for instance the nine lines that follow the Sanctus in Eucharistic Prayer III (108).

You are indeed Holy, O Lord,
and all you have created
rightly give you praise,
for through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
by the power and working of the Holy Spirit,
you give life to all things and make them holy,
and you never cease to gather a people to yourself,
so that from the rising of the sun to its setting
a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name.

In the Latin they constitute one sentence. This single sentence is preserved in the proposed translation, whereas in the present version it appears as three sentences which are decidedly easier to pray aloud and easier for those listening to understand: "Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise. All life, all holiness comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit. From age to age you gather a people to yourself, so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name."

Similarly, the ordering of the phrases in the Doxology at the end of each of the Eucharistic Prayers (98 etc.) does not make for smooth articulation.

Through him, and with him, and in him,
to you, O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
is all honor and glory,
for ever and ever.

Let me conclude with three observations about what has outlined above. Each is related to the overarching tension between literalism and paraphrase in the enterprise of translation. This is especially true of the Roman Canon whose antiquity is in this regard both a blessing and a burden.

1. Given the Biblical and theological scholarship of the past hundred years, some of what was believed and prayed in 1574 is not believed today. A cursory look at the key documents of Vatican II will confirm that. That being the case, should Catholics still be asked to pray what does not accord with the teaching of the

Church? “Our sacrifice” in the present Missal (29) becomes in the proposed translation “my sacrifice and yours”. Faithful to the Latin, yes, but is the implied distinction between the sacrifice of the priest and the sacrifice of the people faithful to the Catholic understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ whose members all share one and the same baptism? Similar tensions between past and present account, I believe, for much of the paraphrasing in the present Missal.

2. I am left with a sense that, with some very clear exceptions, many of the prayers in the proposed translation cry out for poetry or at least for less ponderous prose. For example, Eucharistic Prayer IV in both its present form and in its ecumenical form (cf. Eucharistic Prayer D in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer) has a glorious richness and strength to it which has largely been lost in the proposed translation.

3. When the Bishops at the Vatican Council said that it is the duty of pastors of souls “to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects” (CSL 11), they may or may not have had in mind the three principal concerns discussed above. They will, however, have understood how vital biblical and liturgical catechesis would be in the future for priests and people alike. Apart from that the “full, conscious and active participation” they called for will be a hope unrealized.

Clearly, those who gather at Mass are not meant to be left alone with their prayers; instead they have come together in the power of the Spirit to present to God the Father and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ the corporate *sacrificium laudis* which it is our duty and delight to offer. Some are now calling for reform of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. With the Exodus of God’s people in mind, let me venture a final friendly comment in that regard: Egypt may tempt, but the Promised Land still beckons. Do not turn back, but journey on, sustained by the heavenly food and drink of the altar. *Dominus vobiscum*.

Jeffery Rowthorn has served as chair of the Standing Commission of Liturgy and Music, Episcopal Church USA and taught liturgy at Yale and Berkeley Divinity Schools and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He is Resigned Bishop Suffragan of Connecticut and Retired Bishop Assisting with The Convocation of American Churches in Europe.